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THE SPIRIT OF A STATE

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ON the fourth of March, 1791, just one hundred and twenty-five years ago, the independent republic of Vermont was received into the American Union. This event marked the first addition to the original thirteen States, and the first token of the expansion of America to the West. For it is to be remembered that there was a time when Vermont was the Western frontier. All through the years of its foundation and settlement it was regarded as the far, forbidding West. The feel of the West—consciousness of the possession of immense spaces, of marvelous fertility, of unexampled economic opportunity—came over the early settlers of Vermont.

To realize the mind of any people as they settle a new country, one must consider its contrast with the region from which they came, not its qualities in relation to territory which has since been opened for settlement. The men who made Vermont came from Connecticut and Western Massachusetts, and largely from the hill towns in those regions. They felt themselves in God's new country of boundless wealth and promise—the same feeling that has come over the western pioneer in every stage of his march to the Pacific.

Vermont was the first Northwest, in the manner of its settlement and in the character of its population. It was opened for possession just when the American people began their rapid march toward the Pacific. It took nearly two hundred years of American settlement to reach and people the valleys of Vermont. Southward the progress had been fully as slow, and the ragged line of settlement hugged close to the summit of the Appalachians. After the revolution

began the great migration—the outstanding fact in American history—which peopled the vast convex of the continent from the Western slopes of the Alleghenies to the foothills of the Rockies. From Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay to Southern Vermont the advance of settlement was scarcely a mile a year. The settlers were few; Indians held the country, and the soil was forbidding. The forests were clogged with vines and brush and it took a man a lifetime to clear thirty acres. On the prairies a strong plough and four horses changed virgin soil into fertile farm in one season. There the frontiersman's advance was twenty to thirty miles a year. It was this physical fact which enabled the nation to take possession of the vast mid-continent in a fourth of the time which had been required for the conquest of the Atlantic slope.

The territory of Vermont is not prairie, but it far surpasses lower New England in agricultural possibilities. In the Connecticut and Champlain countries and the innumerable narrow but fertile river-beds of Vermont, the New Englander first came in contact with the rich American soil. He managed to wrest a living from the sand dunes of Massachusetts for the love of God and the dislike of Episcopacy, but when he caught the breath of heavy laden fields, he thrilled with the possibilities of the wealth of a virgin continent, as first the West opened before him.

The pioneers of Vermont were the advance guard of the American army of the conquest of the West. They did not come for religious purposes. They were satisfied both with religious and political conditions in the older communities. But they wanted more land and richer fields. They were not pushed out: they were invited in. It was not undesirable conditions behind them, but attractive opportunities before them, which were the impulse of the movement. In all the settlements of the maritime Atlantic plain it was not so much the desirability of the new region which effected the change of home as the dissatisfaction of the immigrants with conditions, sometimes economic, sometimes religious, sometimes political, in the countries of the old world. But the opening of Vermont was the beginning of a new movement with a new motive. The vast continent had begun to beckon. Generations had come at last which could turn their backs definitely and forever on the old world and who felt their fortunes bound up solely with the new. Then was begun the

real conquest of the continent, and in this conquest the men who made Vermont were in the forefront and opened the highway for the great horde which followed them, the vast army, larger than ever an emperor commanded, of the American Western pioneers.

The settlement of Vermont has its kinship, not with Jamestown and Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, but with the extension of American territory over the vast interior. The original Vermonter was not the weak successor of John Smith and John Alden, but the precursor of the Western frontiersman. Ethan Allen and Daniel Boone were brothers in spirit, brothers of a new race, the stalwart men who subdued the continent and wrought for America its home. It is a far cry from the Pilgrim fathers, with their Cambridge learning, their psalm singing, and their missionaries to the Indians, to the Green Mountain Boys, with their buckskin breeches, their rude, brusque speech, and their beech seal for Tories, but across all the miles of forest and prairie the Green Mountain settler is own brother to the cow-boy of the plains and the trapper and fur-trader of the Rockies.

The early Vermonters were pioneers of pioneers—the ambitious, discontented, radical element from a community rooted and nourished in radicalism. The American wilderness had already begun to do its work with them. Their clan had been trained for one hundred and fifty years in the conquest of the forest. They knew the manner of the god of the land. They knew its game and how to hunt and fish. There was no need for thousands of them to starve, as at Jamestown, while experiments were being made in trying to grow European crops in the European way. They had learned the new life necessary for the new world and they pressed into its heart with the eagerness of men who were creating a new civilization.

Such men are always democratic and lovers of freedom in the extreme. They had no other idea than that they were complete masters in all affairs in the lands they had bought and paid for, and which they had won from the wilderness by severest hardship and toil. They carried individual and community liberty to such a length that it impressed conservative and cultured observers from the seaboard region as the veriest anarchy and disorder. When Timothy D. Dwight, ex-President of Yale College, traveled in northern New England at various times from 1798 to 1810, he noted the radical

and unconventional ideas of large portions of the inhabitants and characterized the Vermonters as "Arabian troops," "lovers of disorder." Their tendency to go into politics he especially deprecated. His judgment of the inhabitants of the new region doubtless represents fairly the opinion of the more cultured communities. He thought the people of Vermont restless, ambitious, cunning, talkative, skilled in land-jobbing. The noise of the men in the taverns talking politics until late at night disturbed his rest, and he lit his candle to record in his note-book that "first settlers are usually those who have met with difficulties at home."

Undoubtedly from his point of view President Dwight was a fair and impartial observer. But as a seaboard man he could not understand nor portray sympathetically the new style of manhood which the American wilderness was creating, just as later the East could not understand Abraham Lincoln. It was the seaboard man again who remarked, in the person of Benedict Arnold, that Ethan Allen was "a proper man to lead his own wild people, but entirely unacquainted with military service."

The Hudson and Champlain valleys, the sea-level highway from the Atlantic to the St. Lawrence, seems to form a natural unity of all American territory to the east and to include Vermont with New England. Vermonters are blood relatives of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, and filial homage binds us to their fellowship. A thousand ties, in culture and thought, in religion and education, in commerce and industry, unite us with the parent States, and we glory in our New England heritage and proudly claim our part in New England eminence and worth.

Nevertheless Vermont is not duly appreciated nor rightly understood until she is accorded her place both as to the last-born child of New England and the first bold emigrant to the West. It was the West in Vermont which President Dwight failed to appreciate. Our people were too rough for him and there was too much of the frontier about them. But it was the "wild people" of Ethan Allen who represented the New America, the America which was to become the American nation, rather than the cultured theologian or the gentleman soldier of the older communities. Two years after the Declaration of Independence, Massachusetts banished sixty graduates of Harvard College among some three hundred Tories, and the roster of the English sympathizers

is declared to read like "the beadroll of the oldest and noblest families concerned in the founding and upbuilding of New England civilization." The "wild people" never sold out their country. They made her what she is, subduing the continent for her home, and in conquering forest and prairie they created the type of man who was to stand before the world as the representative of the new continent—tall, sinewy, strong, keen in wit, droll in speech, piercing to the heart of a matter with shrewd, discerning instinct, quick to pick a quarrel where his rights were concerned and never ready to lay it down till the last ball had left his rifle, generous in service for the common good, believing in the Declaration of Independence as his very gospel and not as a bit of French philosophy for a political purpose, his face to the empire in the West, whither his restless spirit led him on until he had stamped his institutions and his character on the nation whose home he had won.

In the history of America the East has always been a fixed term. It has denoted, and still denotes, the Atlantic seaboard, Europe facing and Europe thinking, conservative, commercial, manufacturing, tending to quiet, ordered ways, guardian of old-world culture, nursery of American literature, American learning and American thought. So long as America was confined to the fringe of colonies on the Atlantic, the nation remained economically dependent, European in thought and culture. The nation was made by its expansion toward the West. Its real independence—intellectual, spiritual, and personal—was achieved in the conquest of the wide spaces of the mid-continent. The American genius was wrought on the ever-receding frontier.

The first stage of the march in the conquest of the continent was accomplished by the men who made Vermont. Her glory is not alone in Plymouth Rock: it is far more on the prairies and beneath the Rockies, where the spirit that awoke first in the Green Mountain valleys has made America great. Vermont, first inland State, first proved the power of expansion in the American people. She was the first State which was never a colony, never in bondage to any man. Her closest kinship is with the free American pioneers, not with the old-world colonists. The men of Vermont started for the West, and if they did not get far, they got far enough to catch its spirit.

JOHN M. THOMAS.